

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a direct information channel via a communications network to e.g. households for advertising purposes. As set out in the appended claims the invention comprises both a method and a system. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention a method for use in a network for sending promotional messages to target groups provided with a display comprises the steps of

- inputting a promotional message;
 - selecting a target group;
 - allocating a promotion channel in said network for said promotional message;
 - allocating a portion of said display for said promotion channel;
 - sending said promotional message over said network in said promotion channel;
- and
- outputting said promotional message in the allocated portion of said display at the selected target group.

The system of a preferred embodiment for sending promotional messages to target groups provided with a display comprises:

means for inputting a promotional message;

means for selecting a target group;

means for allocating a promotion channel in said network for said promotional message;

means for allocating a portion of said display for said promotion channel;

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means for sending said promotional message over said network in said promotion channel; and

means for outputting said promotional message in the allocated portion of said display at the selected target group.

Further details will be found in the claims and the description.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 shows a block diagram of an embodiment of the system in accordance with the invention;

Figure 2 shows an embodiment of a television picture with a promotional banner in accordance with the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS

SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Figure 1 shows a block diagram of a system in accordance with the invention for distributing promotional messages over a communications network to a display. The dashed lines denotes logical information flow. The physical flow is to/from/within the Internet. As shown in Figure 1 the system comprises a back-end control application 1, a central promotion scheduler 2, a regional promotion scheduler 3, a head-end application gateway 4, a response monitor 5, a set-top box 6 and a display 7. The back-end control application 1 is the main application used in defining which promotional message that should be displayed where, when and how. As will be described in more detail below the back-end control application 1 receives input from a plurality of sources including advertising companies, demographical databases, proprietary customer databases, consumer interest profiles, data from previous campaigns etc. The processing of the above sources results in selection criteria which in turn gives a target group of, e.g., households, a point in time to display the promotional message and, if so desired, an enhanced

promotional message. Thus, each promotional message is provided with target group information, e.g. an Internet address. In this way it can be ensured that advertising companies receive the highest possible value for their money. The output of the back-end control application 1 is fed to the central promotion scheduler 2. The central promotion scheduler 2 comprises the main promotion database where promotional messages and related information obtained from said back-end control application 1 are stored. The central promotion scheduler 2 is also responsible for distributing information to the regional promotion scheduler 3 if so required. The main function of the regional promotion scheduler 3 is to off-load the central promotion scheduler 2 due to the large number of households, time slots and promotional messages that the system needs to handle. To this end the regional promotion scheduler 3 may contain a cache of promotional messages and related information to speed up the distribution of that information for a subset of the households. In particular, the regional promotion scheduler 3 may keep track of when it is time to send a particular promotional message down the network in order for it to arrive in time considering potential bandwidth limitations.

The main function of the head-end application gateway 4 is to act as the interface between the rest of the system and the network and thus with the displays. The head-end application gateway 4 interacts with all set-top boxes 6 within its segment in a promotion channel, which is part of the network. In particular, the head-end application gateway 4 handles the individual addressing of the set top boxes 6 based upon the selected target groups and receives all consumer/viewer interaction. The head-end application gateway 4 may for this purpose investigate each logged on consumer profile, match the profile with the selection criteria and forward the appropriate messages to the respective set-top boxes 6. The main function of the response monitor 5 is to act upon consumer/viewer responses when a promotional message is shown. To this end the set-top box 6 is adapted to detect any consumer/viewer interaction with the promotional message and to forward this event via the head-end application gateway 4 to the response monitor 5 which retrieves e.g. a web page to hand over from the back-end control application 1. It also updates the campaign statistics with the event. The main feature of the set-top box 6 is to handle the user interface and the interaction needed with the consumer. The goal is to create a thin GUI client, connected to a server where the server functionality is split between other applications. The application in the set-top box